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## ABSTRACT

The contexts within which teachers engage in personally meaningful discourse about teaching and learning are explored. Connections are drawn between the perspectives and experiences of teachers and the organizational structure of the workplace. Methodology involved a pattern analysis of responses to an open-ended survey administered to 90 K-12 public school teachers. Five themes emerged from the data, which include issues of reciprocity, personal work-oriented benefits, confirmation in one's work role, perceptions of expertise, and probability of future interaction. Data indicate that minimal significant discourse about teaching occurs during formally structured situations and that the most meaningful exchange takes place during informal interaction. The finding suggests a need for rethinking how schools function as work settings and understanding the conditions under which teachers' voices are heard. (21 references) (LMI)

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**TEACHERS' VOICES AND SUPERVISORY PRACTICES:  
IN A DIFFERENT 'DIFFERENT VOICE'**

A paper presented at the 1990 Convention  
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TEACHERS' VOICES AND SUPERVISORY PRACTICE:  
IN A DIFFERENT 'DIFFERENT VOICE'

Over the past 30 years, a rich literature has developed around what may be broadly termed "the institutional context" of instruction and supervision. It seems to us, however, that that literature seldom speaks to both teachers and principals simultaneously.

For example, on the one hand, there exists extensive research related to the workworlds and cultures of teachers and teaching (e.g., DeSanctis & Blumberg, 1979; Dreeben, 1973; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Lortie, 1975; McPherson, 1972; Sarason, 1982; Willower & Smith, 1986). That literature reveals that the typical instructional context is characterized by norms of individualism, isolationism, and autonomy within the classroom. It tells us that, in most schools, there is minimal interaction between and among teachers. Even when informal relationships and social interactions do exist, dialogue seldom centers on the core tasks of teaching and learning. The norm of non-interference in peer's work seems to be endemic.

On the other hand, there exists a separate body of literature concerned with the nature of the administrator's workworld (e.g., Fullan, 1982; Goodlad, 1984; Kmetz & Willower, 1982; Martin & Willower, 1981). That research tells us that principals lead a pressure-cooker life of continual interruptions, little time for observing or assisting with

instruction, and detachment from curriculum and supervision. They too function largely independently, isolated from peer administrators, and in a context characterized by focus on managerial tasks rather than instructional ones.

Both of these bodies of literature, of course, contribute a piece to the total picture of the institutional context of instruction and supervision. The composite image that emerges is that of an enormously busy educational staff, all immersed in a dynamic, demanding work environment characterized by minimal professional interaction or exchange about the core functions of the joint enterprise: teaching and learning. This landscape features a sort of ecological detente, a generally peaceful (if not optimal) coexistence among and between instructional and administrative staff.

The bright spot in this image is that, although the composite accurately captures prevalent scenarios, some researchers (Clark, Lotto, & Astuto, 1984; Freiberg & Knight, 1987; Little, 1982; Pajak & Glickman, 1987; Rosenholtz, 1985) have discovered and described instances of strikingly different educational workworlds (i.e., effective/improving schools), with norms and cultures quite distinct from those portrayed above. This seemingly more hopeful literature shows us that there do exist educational environments in which teachers and administrators are not only talking to, but hearing one another, interacting, and learning from each other about mutually important instructional concerns.

Nonetheless, it seems to us that practitioners and scholars alike would be well served by additional research which attempts to draw connections between the perspectives and experiences of teachers, and the administrative/organizational structuring of the workplace. That is, while Little (1982) and others have established that collegially interactive and productive institutional contexts can and do exist, (and function well for students), we wished to learn more about the specific circumstances under which teachers become personally involved in productive or rewarding dialogue about the core of their work. In a way, we were somewhat dissatisfied with the notion that, simplistically stated, such engagement occurs in effective schools but is missing from those which are less so.

Thus, we set out to explore the contexts within which teachers engage in personally-meaningful discourse about teaching and learning. An assumption which underlies our work is that, as Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986) state so well, teachers' "practical wisdom...remains a largely untapped source of insights" which can and should inform and shape educational policymaking (p. 505).

The title of this article is, of course, an allusion to Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice (1982) in which she wrote about the process and substance of moral development in females. She did this because the moral development research and literature had been conducted and written about from an almost exclusively male point of view, but was generalized to women as

well. (Thus, the "different voice.")

In the case of instructional supervision, an analogous, but not quite so absolute, situation holds. That is, most of the research and writing about supervision is done from the perspective of the supervisor. It's as though there is no partner to the waltz. However, in our research we focused on the other partner, listened to teachers and, thus, a different "different voice."

#### METHOD

Since we were seeking some depth of reflection from our respondents, our research approach was qualitative: we developed an open-ended survey instrument, distributed it to 90 experienced public school teachers (K-12), obtained responses from 48% (n=43) of our sample, and conducted a pattern analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984) of the written responses. The categories/themes that emerged from this analysis form the substance of our subsequent discussion.

The structure of the instrument itself was simple: we asked our respondents to recall and write about a time in which they felt engaged with another person or persons in a meaningful discussion about teaching/learning. They were prompted to include in their accounts specific information about the topic of the conversation, where and when the discussion occurred, who was present, and why they felt it was rewarding, productive, or meaningful in any way. The response sheet also included a request for demographic data (gender, length of experience as a

teacher, and grade level of experience), and a space for self-identification, for those willing to participate in future followup to the study.

It was an experienced group of respondents, in that the range of years as a teacher ran from 2 to 35, with a median of 15.5. Of the 43 respondents, 63% (n=27) were female. The distribution by grade-level of teaching experience was: 37% (n=16) elementary, 33% (n=14) middle or junior high school, 16% (n=7) high school; and 14% (n=6) had taught at all three levels.

Since two researchers collaborated in this study, content analyses of data were conducted independently, as a check on the confirmability of emergent themes and their relative importance to respondents. A focus-group<sup>1</sup> discussion, (of both the emergent themes and the authors' tentative interpretations of same), served as an additional validity check for the study. Because of the sample size and methodology, we venture no claims of generalizability. As often happens in qualitative research, the detailed experiences conveyed in our respondents' stories are difficult to do justice to in a summary report of this kind. Nonetheless, our preliminary data allow us to develop a number of insights and raise certain questions worth sharing in this forum.

In the ensuing presentation of our findings, we focus first on the three fairly concrete questions about context (with whom, where, and when did this engaging discourse occur). Then we describe the various topics of these conversations. Third, we summarize respondents' rationale for ascribing value to their

discussions.

## FINDINGS

### Who, Where, and When

Pattern analyses of responses revealed that productive/rewarding discourse about teaching/learning most frequently occurred in small groups of 3-6 teachers. Less frequently, they involved conversations with one other teacher. And only occasionally did they occur with small groups of family or friends.

With respect to location, approximately one-half of all respondents concurred that conversations in which teachers felt engaged most often occurred in schools, during informal encounters (before or after regular school hours and during lunchtime, in classrooms, faculty lounges, cafeterias, and hallways). A far-removed but second most usual location for such dialogue was the home.

Our data indicated that most respondents (54%) looked no further back in time than approximately one month to recount an experience of engaged dialogue about teaching or learning. However, nine individuals seemed to have to "dig fairly deeply" to conjure up a recollection that met our criteria of being meaningful. Of these nine, the time-descriptors reported were: six months ago (one respondent), one year ago (three respondents), two years ago (three respondents), four years ago (one respondent), and fifteen years ago (one respondent).

### The Substance of Engagement

What was the substance of the discussions recounted for us? Ten categories of responses were identified in the data, but three themes accounted for almost 70% of the responses, so it is to these that we give our attention herein. They were, in descending order of frequency: (a) instructional methodology (that is, specific strategies or approaches to teaching); (b) issues related to an entire class or group of students (e.g., self-esteem, absenteeism, mainstreaming, retention, racial/cultural minorities, discipline); and (c) an individual student. It seems that practical knowledge about the "how" of teaching (n=14; 33%) was almost equivalent in response frequency to much broader schoolwide concerns related to teaching and learning (n=11; 26%). Discussion about individual students was a distant third (n=4; 9%), and the remaining seven categories of themes were mentioned by just one or two respondents each.

### Criteria for Meaningful Discourse

Why were the identified experiences judged to be rewarding, productive, or in any way meaningful for this sample of teachers? Content analyses revealed that the most frequently-occurring single word in respondents' descriptions was "sharing." In descending order of frequency, the major themes that emerged were:

1. Reciprocal exchange of information, ideas, or solutions. The core of this theme was reciprocity, and it often was reported to involve the discovery of a "common ground" of shared concerns

and goals. It is interesting to note that this theme was evident in almost 60% of all responses. A verbatim excerpt which typifies this category follows:

During our discussion, we reached many points of common ground. This was very exciting to me as it was one of the few times I had been able to delve into such a subject at length with another teacher. We were able to bounce ideas off each other, learn from each other, and alter our programs with specific students so that we continued to work toward the same goal.

Or, as stated by another respondent, "It was one of those rare instances where we shared concerns. There was a give and take of ideas."

2. The second most frequent reason (n=10; 23%) for judging a conversation rewarding/productive was personal benefit from the expertise, insights, or suggestions of others. This category differs from the previous one, in that the first emphasizes reciprocity in the exchange, whereas the second focuses on the respondent's having learned something, received assistance, or gained a fresh insight from (an)other teacher(s). For example:

The group gave me some real concrete ideas and strategies to try with these students. Each shared what they personally did and what they found successful. This gave me a whole other viewpoint.

And:

I learned a very valuable lesson that I've never forgotten.

I've even attempted to pass it on to new teachers, now that I've become the veteran.

3. A third rationale (n=8; 19%) for ascribing special meaning to the dialogue may best be described as receiving external confirmation of oneself as a competent teacher. Such conversations tended to reaffirm, from the respondent's perspective, the value of something he/she was doing in the classroom or believed about instruction and learning.

Illustrative of this theme was the comment:

She shared many positive comments about what she had observed me using during the lesson. I felt self-assured, connected, and inspired.

4. The fourth most frequent response (n=5; 12%) is essentially the inverse of the teacher-learner relationship expressed in #2. That is, whereas the second most frequent source of reward/productivity was having learned from another person, this (fourth) rationale emphasizes how the respondent's expertise was useful/enlightening to others. To wit:

It was rewarding because she sought me out for assistance, even though we teach in different areas. I had the expertise to deal with her problem and offer assistance and practical suggestions.

And, "I felt I opened up many new 'windows' of thought for them." (It could be argued, of course, that this sort of "teacher-as-expert" perspective is but a specific subset of the third, self-affirmatory rationale explicated above.)

5. The fifth and least-frequently mentioned reason for valuing a particular conversation (n=4; 9%) was that the exchange resulted in plans for continued dialogue. In an apparent effort to replicate the initial sense of success or reward that emerged from the cited conversation, several respondents indicated that follow-up times to get together to share ideas were established:

I was able to visit with several elementary teachers who are using the integrated language approach and we plan to get together every two weeks to share ideas.

And:

A weekly meeting was set up so that anyone who wished could meet and share "self-esteem" ideas to use with students.

#### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As often happens in open-ended studies such as this, the findings not only provided answers to the initial research inquiries but raised a number of other issues and questions as well. We turn first to the contextual factors...what we have referred to as the "who, where, and when" of these conversations.

Perhaps not surprisingly (although continually disturbing, we think), principals, supervisors, and administrators were rarely mentioned in these teachers' reflections about meaningful discourse related to the core of their work (n=2; 4.5%). Moreover, irrespective of the increase (reported in the normative literature) in the implementation of peer coaching, teacher mentoring, and clinical assessment models, those contexts were not identified by any of our respondents. Prevalent supervisory

processes seem to continue to fail to engage teachers in productive discourse about their craft. Is this indicative that, despite recent concerted efforts in the field...and considerable heartfelt cheerleading from academe..."instructional leadership" is no more a part of enlightened school management and administrative preparation programs than it ever was in the past?

Regarding location, again, for us, the failure to mention certain contexts seemed interesting, and lent support to the concern expressed in the preceding question. Teaching centers (widely available to all of our New York sample) and supervisory conferences were not identified, and only in isolated instances was mention made of department or grade-level meetings, school improvement committees, university courses, administrative offices, or inservice activities of any sort. This latter group of contexts appeared to be only minimally meaningful to our sample of respondents.

And lastly, with respect to the "when" question, although for over half our respondents the reported engagement occurred in the relatively recent past, for almost twenty percent of them the time descriptors ranged from six months to 15 years. Somehow, something seems wrong with the adult interactive character of a teacher's school experience when one has to go back more than a few days or weeks to recall a personally-meaningful conversation about the core of one's work. Is it the people? The work? The system? (It should be noted that respondents were not prompted to identify the most engaging teaching-relevant conversation, but

simply an instance in which they felt personally involved in a discussion about teaching or learning.)

Beyond the contextual issues of time, place, and person were the data regarding teachers' reasons for valuing the cited conversations as rewarding, productive, or meaningful. The reader will recall that five themes were revealed: issues of reciprocity/sharing, receiving a personal work-oriented benefit, being confirmed in one's work and role, being perceived as having expertise, and the possibility that the conversation referred to laid the groundwork for continuing the dialogue in the future. Taken together, although these findings re-confirm Clark, Lotto, & Astuto's (1984) conclusions that "Teacher-teacher interactions provide for technical and psychological support as well as personal reinforcement" (p. 58), we felt our data further illuminated the meaning of "technical support"...with a clear emphasis not on what to teach, but how. It seemed that content-knowledge and/or curriculum were apparently perceived as "givens" and that it was in the area of instructional methodology that support from others was most valued.

Another way to interpret the themes which emerged from these data may be to think of our respondents' rationale as potential guidelines for supervisors (whether teacher-peers or administrators) in their interactions with faculty. This approach raises questions...some of which aren't new... such as: How, within the system of supervision, is a sharing set created? How does one create a situation where the other will get a sense

of personal benefit? How does one enable a teacher to feel confirmed in his or her role? How does one enable a teacher to get a sense of expertise as an adult helper? How can supervisors create a sense of positive anticipation at the prospect of a continuing dialogue?

The way our practitioner-corroborators (that is, our focus group participants) viewed the implications of this study was to frame the major issues in terms of reallocation of the scarce resources of time and space. In other words, they were inclined to generate suggestions as to how existing school structures could be modified....essentially to promote (by providing the time and space for) more teacher-to-teacher interactions during the school workyear. These recommendations ran the gamut from purposefully agenda-less breakfasts and after-school snack buffets, to staff outings, to less-structured use of traditional staff-development days. (In practice, food and refreshments comprise a strategy that seldom fails to attract teacher attention.) These may be deceptively simple means of nurturing meaningful conversation about teaching and learning.

A critical (and certainly far from simple) premise underlying the focus-group perspective, however, was the notion of trust: that given time and space, and coupling those two resources with the straightforward and clearly-communicated expectation of instructional idea-sharing, most teachers can and would make productive use of such opportunities. The assumption is that, as professionals, teachers could be counted on to use

release time responsibly, to set their own agenda, and to engage in meaningful interaction about the core of their work. An important symbolic message could be promulgated by entrusting the instructional staff with increased amounts of professional discretion. The premise thus reinforced is that most school faculties have within them the knowledge and skills - - if they are understood, shared, and used - - to make a better school. The skeptics among us, however, might be quick to point out the potential folly of simply arranging for more unencumbered time in the workday and crossing our fingers. "Good things" may or may not happen.

All of this seems to lead to the much more complex underlying dilemma of engineering or structuring informality... admittedly an oxymoron. Rosenholtz (1985), for example, takes the position that "Norms of collegiality do not simply happen. Rather they are carefully engineered by structuring the workplace with frequent exposure to contact and frequent opportunities for interaction" (p. 367). Lee Shulman (1989), among others, has advanced ideas about how to provide structure to collegial interaction: for example, the "case conferencing" model, wherein weekly or biweekly opportunities are built into the educational workday, somewhat paralleling the clinical medical model of teaching hospitals. Such conferences would draw upon the school staff's own recent experiences, as a means of addressing interesting and timely issues in a problem-solving or resolution-sharing mode. Shulman (1989) notes that:

Case conferences would be one strategy for preserving the experiences of individual teachers and making those experiences and their analysis available to colleagues for review and discussion. (p. 183)

The clinical conferencing idea meshes nicely with Rosenholtz's (1985) conclusion that opportunities for collegial interaction may be structured into the work setting. And, in fact, school administrators do confirm that, although the logistics are challenging, it is possible to design schedules such that small groups of teachers are released from teaching for groupwork...in addition to, rather than instead of, their regular release time for daily planning.

But beyond the problematic issue of how we might "engineer" a greater degree of task-oriented collegial discussion into the schools, is the question of whether we should try to engineer this? Our findings cause us concern about the amount or balance of "carefully engineered structures" for interaction. After all, these data indicate minimal "engaging discourse" about teaching during formally-structured meetings of any sort. Instead, they tell us that the most meaningful exchange occurs in times of informal interaction.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Important questions raised in this discussion remain unanswered...and ripe for additional research. Do we leave these exchanges to serendipity, albeit with a healthy dose of trust...or do we deliberately look for opportunities to create

informal learning/sharing situations and somehow infuse them into the school workworld? Insights from this study of the contexts and substance of meaningful teacher interaction suggest a need for educational leaders and supervisors to rethink how schools function as work settings, and to understand the conditions under which teachers' voices are heard.

#### ENDNOTES

1. The focus-group consisted of 18 current or former public school teachers, half of whom had provided written responses to the survey, and half of whom had no previous knowledge of the study. The first author facilitated the group discussion. Its purpose was twofold: a) to see if preliminary findings "rang true" to the experiences of a larger and more diverse group of educators, and b) to solicit practitioners' insights and interpretations of the data set and preliminary conclusions. Focus-group research models are discussed in Krueger (1988) and Morgan and Spanish (1984).

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